

# A Phenomenological Narrative Study: Elementary Charter School Principals' Managerial Roles

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This study was a phenomenological narrative research investigating the managerial roles of elementary charter school principals. Managerial leadership practices were investigated under three categories personnel management, student management, and finance management. Elementary charter school principals provided positive feedback for having small size schools.*

## **Introduction**

The first charter school, City Academy in St. Paul, began operation in 1992 after Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991 as noted by the Minnesota Legislative Reference Library (2014). In the subsequent years, the number of states passing charter school laws grew and according to The Center for Education Reform (2015) only eight states, Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia, were left without a charter law as of 2015. Maloney, Sheehan, and Rainey (2011) reported that the first charter school legislation in Texas was passed in 1995 and the first charter schools were opened in 1996. According to a report posted on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website, the number of charter school districts in operation as of the 2015-2016 school year was 182 (TEA, 2015).

Charter schools are a school of choice and a part of school reform that has grown substantially with a greater demand every year, according to The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) dashboard (2014). The number of charter schools has reached 6,440 nationwide, with a growth rate of 7.3%, serving more than two million (2,513,634) students in the United States during the 2013-14 school year. In Texas, 689 charter campuses were in operation during the 2013-14 school year along with a growth rate of 7.9%. Texas charter schools served 238,091 students with 71.1% low socioeconomic status and 58.2% Hispanic population.

Since demand for charter schools was linked to charter school growth new roles were defined for charter school principals. Robenstine (2000) discussed the role of a charter school principal as manager within a school choice context and added that managerial roles of charter schools principals would require them to be customer focused. Thus, charter school principals make decisions responsive to parents and the needs of the community for the survival of their schools and their managerial decisions are driven by efficiency and cost effectiveness due to competitiveness. Therefore the purpose of this study is to explore elementary charter school principal's perceptions of their managerial roles.

## **Literature Review**

A report by Alberta Education (2009) indicated that as schools have become larger, the roles of principals have been transformed regarding leadership and managerial duties. These new roles of school principals have included being more involved in developing the school mission and goal, setting priorities, managing human resources and school finances, developing and managing school improvement plans, reporting system requirements, maintaining public and community relations, being accountable for educational outcomes, gathering information, and making data-based decisions. Principal's managerial roles are a part of the leadership dimension of a school principal.

Lunenburg (2010) investigated leadership functions of principals in general. He classified management skills into three categories, technical, human, and conceptual. He noted that effective principals designed their actions to build managerial and cultural linkages for instance time management and interpersonal relationships were required for coordinating school activities and developing budgets and mathematical skills were required for finance management. He emphasized the importance of having management skills in order to become an effective principal.

Allen and Gawlik (2009) studied roles of charter school principals in comparison with their counterparts in districts. They noted that charter school principals were responsible for additional managerial duties such as finding and maintaining school facilities, handling finances, recruiting and retaining quality staff, negotiating with school boards, and recruiting students. The researchers also added that charter school principals tackle the most with personnel issues and limited budgets in addition to facilities.

More recently, Germeten (2011) conducted a study investigating the changes in the roles of principals in Norway. The study surveyed and interviewed elementary principals located in small towns in the region of Finnmark, in the arctic zone. Study results provided increased understanding of the global roles of principals and the hardship of school management. For instance, lacking qualified staff, high teacher turnover rates, having inadequate time to cooperate and plan, and increasing workloads were among the problems mentioned by principals. Principals expressed concerns regarding receiving little or no support from school owners during implementation of a new curriculum after the curriculum was launched based on reform efforts. Germeten suggested that principals undergo extra mentoring and curriculum training to support school reform. Maloney, Sheehan, and Rainey (2011) evaluated charter school programs in Texas focusing on the experiences and outcomes of new charter schools. The charter schools included in the study were the schools authorized to start serving students between 2006 and 2009. The results of the study revealed that parents and students were satisfied with their charter schools. Parents chose charter schools for their children because charter schools were small in size and specialized in their educational programs. However, open enrollment charter schools struggled with locating and furnishing facilities and recruiting and retaining qualified teachers.

## **Methodology**

The current study was part of a larger qualitative narrative study utilizing a phenomenological narrative research design to explore ranged from prekindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, all schools were rated as Met Standard in 2013 based on the Texas accountability system. Principals had one to five years of experience as charter school principals and from two to 14 years as principals in traditional public schools. Collective demographic information of the schools which had participating principals is shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used for each principal.

Table 1  
*Collective Information of Charter Schools*

Principal's Name	Grade	Enrollment	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Other	Econ. Disadv.
Mr. James	PK-6	440	17.7%	16.4%	61.6%	2.5%	1.8%	55.9%
Mr. Carter	K-8	271	6.6%	18.1%	64.2%	6.3%	4.4%	16.2%
Ms. Hopkins	K-5	435	11.1%	85.6%	2.2%	0.8%	-	97%
Ms. Jackson	PK-8	658	0.2%	97.9%	1.2%	0.8%	-	98.6%
Dr. Marshall	PK-8	617	82.8%	16.5%	0.3%	-	-	65.2%
Dr. Spears	K-7	153	36.6%	27.5%	18.3%	15.7%	-	40.5%

The data were gathered through face-to-face or telephone interviews. The interview prompt included questions which addressed specific research questions. Open ended interviews were audio-recorded and notes were taken during the interview. Although interviewing was the main data collection tool, artifacts, documents, and field notes were also gathered to enhance data collection procedures. The content gleaned from the interviews was transcribed and the resulting data were analyzed by identifying emerging themes. The stories of the participants were revealed, retold, and rewritten in a chronological sequence to thematically analyze their content for textual and structural descriptions based on a thematic approach. To demonstrate credibility, the researcher triangulated data sources, implemented peer review, conducted member checking, and wrote in thick, rich, detailed description.

## Findings

This study investigated managerial leadership practices of elementary charter school principals under three categories personnel management, student management, and finance management.

### Personnel Management

All principals shared their experiences regarding personnel management and voiced their concerns around teacher support, high teacher turnover rate and hiring practices, and shared responsibilities.

**Teacher support.** Mr. Carter was the only principal without a concern regarding personnel management. His school had the lowest economically disadvantaged percentage, 16.2%, compared to others. He was so confident with his teachers' skills that he did not like to micromanage teachers' duties unless needed. Instead, he chose to see the teachers as caring professionals who took care of what they needed in the classrooms. He described himself as a "team leader and team player" who was always ready to help when needed and did not find personnel management to be an issue nor difficult to handle. Mr. Carter pointed out that he chose to trust his teachers' skills and qualifications to do their jobs.

In addition, Dr. Spears was the only participant who talked about termination practices. She defined herself as tough when she needed to terminate the teachers. She had not found it

easy to talk to teachers about something they have not done correctly when she had been an assistant principal. She added that school administrators had to develop a skill of “saying tough things to nice people with grace” and be comfortable about it for the benefit of students. She said, “I understand that I do not help this teacher with this particular area that the damage to the students will continue. And I cannot have that.”

Dr. Spears listed the ways she supported her teachers such as providing resources, supporting with mentors, identifying areas of weakness, making action plans with them, and asking the teachers how to support them. She was organized and structured in working with struggling teachers for whom she made growth plans, planned follow up meetings, scheduled each meeting on the calendar to have enough documentation, and followed the process. If things did not get better then she would tell the teacher:

You know what, I cannot let you continue that you not met any of our goals that we had for you, and I do not see you working hard to meet those goals. I really feel like you are sending me a message but this is not the place for you. Here is your letter and you are being terminated.

**High teacher turnover rate and hiring practices.** Dr. Spears experienced many personnel issues including high teacher turnover. She said that her new teachers often left for other schools after getting wonderful and very expensive professional development at her school. In response to high teacher turnover, Dr. Spears listed her hiring efforts such as hosting job fairs, putting ads in the newspapers, and hiring her friends from the community.

Sharing his practices, Mr. James mentioned that he hired experienced and successful teachers with at least five years of experience in an independent school district with an assumption that “those teachers have already had trainings and learned to develop good instructional practices in their classrooms” and would require little mentoring support since his school did not have an established support systems for teachers. However, recently he shifted from this model and hired a couple of brand new teachers, and trusted that his dean of instruction and current experienced teachers could serve as mentors for these new teachers.

Mr. James commented that most charter schools simply hire inexperienced teachers because they were “cheaper to hire.” He talked about the cycle of teacher turnover when an inexperienced teacher has been hired without a support system in place that the new teacher typically struggles, becomes frustrated, and then leaves. Afterwards, another new and inexperienced teacher will be hired, and the cycle continues. He added that schools and instruction would suffer because of this teacher turnover cycle simply because there was nobody at schools long enough to maintain effective instructional practices.

Ms. Jackson’s approach was different in that she mentioned the lack of personnel in her school and listed charter school principal duties, such as monitoring attendance, dealing with personnel matters, performing parent-teacher conferences, and conducting conferences with teachers. She also added that charter school principals not only have been the instructional leader but also the manager of the attendance on the campus. Her concerns were around lack of resources and personnel.

**Shared responsibilities.** Personnel management responsibilities were shared between Ms. Hopkins’s charter school and her charter district central office. She managed school level personnel issues, such as tardiness and attendance, and the human resources (HR) department managed hiring from the central office. She found this “real supportive in that aspect.”

Dr. Marshall’s school operated under a charter management company, so he followed policies, procedures, and protocols mandated by his management company in regards to

personnel management including hiring. He listed hiring process steps as follows: screening, initial interview with the candidate, and the candidate present a model lesson. The model lesson was viewed by a panel of teachers and then an offer letter was extended for a qualifying candidate.

## **Student Management**

All principals addressed discipline within their schools and support structures to maintain a safe environment for learning. In addition, principals emphasized their managerial role in developing and sustaining an appropriate school culture.

**Principal's role in discipline.** Mr. Carter was happy with the discipline at his school. He praised his teachers for having great instructional and relationship skills toward handling disruptive situations in the classrooms. According to Mr. Carter, these skills helped them deescalate and disarm disruptive situations. When a discipline referral arose which he needed to address, he preferred to take care of the issue quickly “to show that teachers feel that they're being supported in their efforts.”

Mr. Carter pointed out that all students were held accountable for their actions and those individual situations were examined carefully so they could be managed properly. He used “What if” questions when he noticed an overreaction on the part of the teacher concerning a discipline issue. He asked teachers in these situations: “What if you just said, 'Well, why do you not just get back on that page and have a seat, and then we'll talk about this afterwards?'” His intent was for teachers to better analyze “what they could have done instead of what they actually did.” Mr. Carter acknowledged that his role in student management involved disposing student referrals in a quick and proper way.

Student management of discipline was one of Dr. Marshall’s strengths because he had an experience dealing with management of students when he was an assistant principal in the traditional public school. Although he was not dealing with day to day discipline issues within his charter school campus, he still had the final say over serious discipline consequences such as expulsions and suspensions.

Dr. Spears linked to classroom management issues of new teachers at her charter school. She worked on this “huge issue” by having behavior plans in place and continually revisiting the plans with teachers. They talk about best practices around discipline management plans and how things needed to be handled within the classroom. She has not been supportive of sending students to the principal for minor infractions such as not having a pencil or being loud in class. She provided strategies to handle those classroom issues such as calling home, meeting with parents when they come for pick up, and logging conversations with parents. She said, “90% of the time the stupid stuff stops when you are in communication with the parent.” She also talked about what happens when a child was sent to her for discipline issues. She said:

Remember what the deal is when you say to me “I can no longer handle this child, I put them in your hands,” you are in essence saying that you are giving up the responsibility of that child to me. So then I get to say and you don’t get to complain about what I chose to do as a consequence.

She added that when teachers sent a student out of the classroom they are sending a message to all the other students that they have lost control over that particular child and have no control of the class at all. Other than sending those messages she preferred teachers to tap into resources and handle the discipline in classroom.

Dr. Spears sometimes intervened to minimize personality conflicts between parents and teachers as a negotiator to support her teachers. She works with teachers who provided a good education for students and she did not want to lose them for having a gruff voice and “sometimes being mean to students.”

For student management and discipline Ms. Jackson’s school has been using a program called grade book. This program has been used locally by teachers for posting grades and attendance. In addition, there has been a Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) department in her campus that has been managing attendance and discipline records.

**Establishing a positive school culture.** Ms. Hopkins’s school used a school-wide classroom management program to establish a positive school culture called “CHAMPS.” “CHAMPS” stands for Conversation, Help, Activity, Movement, Participation, and Success. They outsourced the training for this program to a third party company which has been providing the training for students and staff members. In describing her school’s discipline issues regarding building a positive school culture, Ms. Hopkins said:

I have fewer discipline issues in this school than any school I've ever been engaged. And I think part of it is because there is a sort of a self-selection process. Because we are a small school, we are really on top of parents who don't get their kids here on time at the school. So, I think their parents get tired from us and decided to select themselves out. Same thing with picking them up late. Same thing with not being supportive. No one ever comes to school out of uniform. Or we call the parent and they have to pick them up or bring them a change of clothes. So, we are very consistent, and I think pretty demanding in those kinds of commitments from parents.

She added that they meet with parents of students before the student’s enrollment in the school. The discussions focused on parent expectations. An agreement was signed as an outcome of that meeting. She said, regarding the agreement, “We don’t hesitate to pull that out, show it to them again if we don’t get the support we need.” She provided an example regarding discipline issues within the school that she recently had to break the first fist-fight in three years.

Ms. Hopkins repeated several times throughout the interview that the reason behind good discipline and positive school culture at her school was a result of classes being fairly small. She said, “We never go over 22 kids in class, and normally they’re less than that.” Besides being small, Ms. Hopkins added that the school is in an old grocery store building converted into school with only two areas of access—the front door and the door to the cafeteria. This feature makes the school an “enclosed environment.” She noted that her assistant principal has been at the school since the beginning of school, and “she knows every child, and every parent in the school. Actually, she knows every child, every parent who has ever had children in the school.” Ms. Hopkins added that her office ladies know every child and parent as well. She said, “So there is never a time when someone thinks that they can get away with something that their parents will not find out about because everybody knows everyone.” In addition, she touched on another practice in her school that she called “data meeting.” In those meetings her administrative team, including office staff, discussed data pertaining to enrollment as well as student and staff attendance.

Students in Dr. Marshall’s charter school are called “scholars.” In explaining the role of students in his charter school in regards to establishing a positive school culture regarding student management, he said, “Scholar is responsible for the culture building within the building.” He added that the expectations, discipline issues, and culture within the building are clearly articulated within their parent and scholar handbook as well. School wide expectations

and rules including hallway, cafeteria, and classroom expectations have been enforced by the Dean. In addition Dr. Marshall said, "Teachers have rules and requirements that are consistent across the school."

Treating kids with respect has been Dr. Spear's school motto regarding discipline management and a positive culture. She said, "So it is about treating kids with respect, it is about really implementing practices that we have asked you to do. All of that speaks to whether you are going to have good classroom management in your classroom or not."

Mr. James mentioned that trainings were available to support his teachers in becoming better disciplinarians and added that systems in his school have been updated "to help a kid to behave" while supporting the teachers at the same time. He also noted that his school's student management system was very traditional, with specific procedures in place.

## **Financial Management**

Financial management practices differed somewhat for each charter school. All principals identified their internal policies and procedures for purchasing within their tight budgets and emergent themes included transparency and limited responsibilities.

**Transparency.** Dr. Spears said that they have been very transparent in financial management practices. Her school has a committee, board of control, including the office manager, several teachers, and the principal that meet once a month and review bank statements and expenditures. The committee oversees spending. The students and teachers raise funds for student and teacher activities which must have been approved by the board of control. There are restrictions on spending including federal funds. She said, "Any money raised by students can only be spent on students." She also added that no funds could be spent on teachers and they have been compliant with federal funds. She said, "We pick tax payer money so we have to be very respectful of that." She mentioned that they have been very careful about spending because of limited funds and high costs.

Dr. Spears pointed out several internal procedures regarding safety, for example money could never be left overnight in teacher's classrooms. The school has a safe in the closet for lunch money and the office manager has to deposit money at least three times a week because she did not want any money to stay in the safe. Each school has a credit card for purchases. No tax could be paid with the card. While she makes purchases she tries to buy things at half price from the Internet. She buys used dictionaries and used curriculum books. She is careful in not paying tax while shopping online as well. She concluded, "We do not play with the money here."

Mr. James's charter school board was very involved in finance management. He said that any expense greater than \$2,500 required board approval and added that his school had a budget committee which reviews expenditures, revenues, checks and balances. He proudly talked about an additional school building project which has begun worth 4.8 million dollars. His school is working with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for a loan guarantee for this new building project. He sounded happy that he would have a new building for his campus.

Mr. Carter mentioned that principals have been granted more rights over the school finance than ever before. He admitted, however, that there was not any room for control over the salaries portion of the budget since this was all pre-determined. He said that there was a tendency for charter school principals to conserve the money in their budgets as long as they could. However, he supported the idea of spending the budget for instructional materials during the current year rather than saving them for the following year. He also discussed district purchasing

practices for schools as a means to secure the best price for the item considering their limited budgets via checking catalogs, exploring Amazon, as well as other locations that might offer better prices. He concluded by saying that there was not a lot he could do as a principal in terms of financial management of the school.

**Limited responsibilities.** Principal Hopkins discussed her school's financial management practices and mentioned that principals have been "given control over a good part of general budget." Although she had control over the general budget, it is not the case for title budgets. Title I, Title II, and Title III were held centrally. She pointed out that schools were required to contact central office personnel to access those funds.

Two principals, Ms. Jackson and Dr. Marshall, mentioned that their financial management responsibilities were limited. Ms. Jackson explained her financial management involvement by saying "You know what, in this charter I don't have to do anything with finance." Then she elaborated on her point that finance has been handled by the Superintendent and business office. She talked about requisition process that purchasing requests should be approved by the Superintendent and purchasing manager. Ms. Jackson mentioned that she convinced the Superintendent to streamline the process and he agreed that each campus would get an allotted budget next year for teacher and student driven activities. This new process would provide principals some control over their school's budget.

Dr. Marshall's role in finance management of his charter school has been limited to certain responsibilities as mandated by charter management company such as assisting with the development of campus wide and district wide budget and "making predictions as far as staffing patterns." He also assisted with projecting the budget "based upon number of student enrollment" and allocating funds for various pilot programs within the charter district.

### Implications for Practice

A limitation of this research was that it included only six participants. The findings of this study provided increased understanding of the elementary charter school principals' roles and the hardship of school management and added some new perspectives on the need for guidance, training, and funding resources in charter schools. Addressing the needs for teacher support, high teacher turnover rates, effective hiring practices, better discipline, building a school culture, increasing transparency and autonomy in finance management must be a top priority for charter holders. Thus, charter school principals would benefit from having additional support, additional funding for school buildings, and additional professional development opportunities tailored to the specific needs of charter schools.

From policy point of view the findings suggest that providing equity in funding for charter schools including funding for facilities could be a smart way to support school choice. Providing funding for rent and maintenance expenses for charter schools will increase charter schools' financial power to retain talent and be competitive at the market. Charter school principals would benefit from providing better incentives and comparable salaries for their teachers in managing high teacher turnover rates (Nawab, 2011).

For policy importance Allen and Gawlik (2009) noted that there was a synergetic relationship potential between charter and district schools. Hence, more collaboration among school leaders might provide solutions to charter school problems such as limited resources and building capacity. This kind of a collaboration and network would help charter school principals evaluate the effectiveness of their programs in order to be more efficient in their managerial

duties and increase public awareness about their schools. Charter school principals must consider ways to increase dialogue with traditional public school principals since this type of professional network have the potential to benefit all relevant parties.

Findings also suggested that elementary charter school principals provided positive feedback for having small size schools. The benefits of being small in size included having good discipline in classes, having a private school atmosphere where parents and educators can work together, being more collaborative with the teachers, and being more structured. Ultimately, this could lead to revisiting class size requirements at public schools since the findings report benefits of small size schools. Overall, charter school principals were outspoken and confident regarding their managerial roles including managing student discipline, budgets, and resources. Grissom and Loeb (2009) indicated that managerial tasks were positively related to school performance and they were among the highest ratings based on self-assessed effectiveness. Lunenburg (2010) reported that high performance would require managerial skills such as using organizational resources through effective planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring. The findings of this study support previous research that managerial skills play a vital role in outcomes and charter schools would benefit from having principals with great managerial skills.

In addition, Allen and Gawlik (2009) argued that choice should be an integral part of public education system at large, not specific to only charter schools. The researchers pointed out the necessity of broadening principal preparation programs to address unique challenges of charter school principals.

### **Future Research**

This study raises a number of opportunities for future research that it could be extended in longitudinal way. The changes in managerial duties of charter school principals can be investigated using a similar design with more participants for over a longer period of time up to four years. This might provide us a better picture of the evolving role of charter school principals. Another possible research opportunity could be exploring the ways of collaboration among charter and traditional public schools as suggested by Allen and Gawlik (2009). Possible research questions include:

- What are the ways charter schools and traditional public schools work together? Any promising practices?
- What are the barriers for collaboration among charter schools and traditional public schools?

Finally, this study investigated charter school principals' perceptions regarding their managerial roles. Further research is needed to define common problems at charter schools and explore managerial skills needed to provide solutions to those common problems. In addition a correlational study regarding job satisfaction and managerial skills that could provide a systematic analysis of principals' skills and their impact on operational effectiveness.

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